

Minutes

Catawba County Board of Commissioners
Special Session, Tuesday, January 4, 2005, 6:00 p.m.

County Schools

Special session with three school boards of education

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01/04/05

The Catawba County Board of Commissioners met in special session on Tuesday, January 4, 2005, 6:00 p.m., at the Catawba County Schools Annex, 2285 Anderson Ave, Newton, North Carolina. Dinner was available at 5:30 p.m. and the meeting began at 6:00 p.m. The Catawba County Board of Commissioners met jointly with the Boards of Education of the Catawba County Schools, Newton-Conover City Schools, and Hickory Public Schools.

Catawba County Board of Commissioners:

Present were Chair Katherine W. Barnes, Vice-Chairman Dan A. Hunsucker, Commissioners Glenn E. Barger, and Barbara G. Beatty.

Absent: Commissioner Lynn M. Lail was in Washington DC for the swearing in ceremony of Congressman Richard Burr.

A quorum was present. No action was taken.

Also present were County Manager/Deputy Clerk J. Thomas Lundy, County Attorney Robert Oren Eades, County Clerk Barbara E. Morris, and Budget Manager Judy Ikerd.

Board of Education of the Catawba County Schools:

Present were Betty Blackburn, Sherry Butler, Steve Hilton, Joyce Spencer, Bo Scott, Charlie Wyant, and Mark Sigmon.

Dr. Ann Hart, Terry Bledsoe and Attorney Crystal Davis were also present.

Board of Education of the Newton-Conover City Schools:

Present were Randy Isenhower, Jim Stockner, Betty Coulter, Susan Hicks, Scott Loudermelt and Mark Canrobert.

Dr. Will Crawford was present.

Board of Education of the Hickory Public Schools:

Present were Sarah Talbert, Joab Cotton, Gloria Hemphill, Vanessa Linebarger, Robert Braswell and David Elder were present.

Dr. Duane Kirkman, Dr. Ric Vandett, Mary Duquette and Attorney Jeff Mackie were present.

1. Welcome.

At 6:12 p.m., Chair Barnes welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted Commissioner Lail's absence was due to her attendance in Washington at Richard Burr's swearing in ceremony. She said with the many intergovernmental relationships that the Commissioners and the school boards have, it was important to have that presence in Washington to have the availability for congressional contact. She said Commissioner Lail sent her regards for the evening's meeting and she was anxious to hear the results. Chair Barnes thanked Catawba County Schools for hosting the meeting and said the facility was wonderful and thanked the maintenance staff for their work and asked Dr. Hart to convey the Board's appreciation to them. Chair Barnes then asked the above attendees to introduce themselves.

2. Purpose.

Catawba County Board of Commissioners Chair Barnes said that back in early December there had been a wonderful rally for public education with the Champions of Education presentation. Chair Barnes thanked Phil Null for the many hours he had put in working with the Foresight Committee and bringing this report to all the Boards. She said this is a great challenge as the Boards faced the strategic plan that was before them and which highlights a pathway that they all have an opportunity to take. This was the purpose of the evening's meeting and Chair Barnes said she was pleased that Danny Hearn was present and thanked him for organizing the Champions of Education Forum in December which approximately 300 people attended. She noted the Chamber had made an offer that the Boards needed to take seriously and look at and it was part of what would be discussed during the evening. Chair Barnes then asked the school boards to discuss the prioritizing they had done with the eight points that the Foresight Report set forth.

3. School Board Discussions:

Sarah Talbert said they had met in December to talk about the strategies and to plan for this evening's joint meeting. In a joint meeting of the Boards in November the priority of the strategies was set and sent to the Board of Commissioners. She did not believe it was necessary to discuss in depth the Foresight report as Mr. Null had come before each of the Boards and the County Commissioners and the report had been in their possession for several months and they had had time to digest it. They felt very good about what has been put out in the report because it is information the Boards had been sharing for a long time.

Further comments from Board members were on their efforts of coming together to agree on the priority of the strategies set forth in the Foresight report. The first priority was an increase in teachers' supplements. All three Boards had that issue in the forefront. The second priority was obtaining special funding and the third priority was Community Education Partnership and Annual Education Forum and then came the need to increase the number of specialists serving minority children and provide support services with psychological social workers.

Chair Barnes noted there were price tags with all those items and the Board had received estimates for those. Charlie Wyant said that the three boards believed the idea of this meeting was to show the County Board and all in attendance that the three boards were together on supporting the Foresight Committee. They acknowledged there was a price tag but the Boards were in agreement with the report and were willing to take a risk and they would strive to meet the goals.

Chair Barnes said she knew that money was not the only answer but was only a portion of the solution of seeking greater achievement from the students. She asked the Boards to describe their strategies to reach this goal. Sarah Talbert said the Boards wanted to move forward with this goal as quickly as possible and also create a community partnership with the help of the Chamber of Commerce and the community leaders. She pointed out under the varied pathways for technical skills strategy, Newton-Conover Schools has a new school project funding for a new high school learning community and all three schools systems had applied for and were accepted to the Learn and Earn initiative and all three systems have participated with the Chamber in the Future for Kids project and these were examples of the items that don't need additional funding.

Chair Barnes acknowledged these efforts and said she would like to know more about the Learn and Earn initiative. It was explained as a college program that is a partnership with Catawba Valley Community College and the three school systems and allows the students to be brought to the community college at the ninth grade level and do their whole high school schooling at the college. The result would be the students attending this program for five years and at the end of the program they would have their high school degree from their home school as well as an associates degree.

Chair Barnes said these initiatives such as Future for Kids and Learn and Earn needed to have a public information campaign to get parents to support such programs and noted since jobs are disappearing, students are going to have to have a minimum of a high school diploma to move forward.

Chair Barnes noted that in the report there was a request for budget year 2005/06 for 5.3 million dollars. The Board looked at that in relationship to the tax revenues, and it equated to an additional 5 cents. The number one point that the school boards have brought forward is to increase the teachers supplement. The Board needed to have a good understanding regarding the recruitment and retention of teachers and what the school boards felt about how the increase in supplement would impact the students.

It was stated that an increase in supplement would retain and attract qualified teachers to this area and having qualified teachers would affect student achievement. North Carolina schools are short by about 3000 teachers to replace those retiring and leaving the profession for other reasons. A 22 year college graduate is looking at the money they can earn. It's a great county but the more the county schools can offer the better chance they have of getting teachers and keeping them here.

Commissioner Hunsucker asked if the school boards were hearing from teachers who were leaving and retiring early that money was the reason they were leaving. He was told that some who have left have gone into different professions. Another reason is that this area is no longer "home grown" – kids who have grown up here do not stay here to work. The teachers who are coming in now are not from here and need an incentive to stay to retirement. The different student population also adds to teachers leaving.

Commissioner Beatty asked about signing bonuses. The response was that teachers who have been in the system resent signing bonuses as its giving new teachers a reward that the seasoned teachers are not receiving and this created a morale problem.

Another noted problem is the lack of teachers being produced by the North Carolina colleges.

Morale was listed as a problem and it is believed that a small increase in the supplement would affect that problem.

The encouragement of community involvement such as the mentoring program would help the teachers and improve morale. The need for more support staff (psychologists, school nurses, etc) was noted and would help with retention of teachers so they have the assistance to do their job. While it was believed that the supplement would recruit, this support would retain teachers.

Commissioner Barger asked how many vacancies are currently in the system and was told approximately 4 in one system and it is difficult to fill the spots. Another said 6, another 5 and these vacancies are with retirees who are allowed to double-dip filling additional vacancies.

Commissioner Barger also asked about other necessary services, such as ESL, to serve the special population. Responses indicated the challenge to meet this need has gotten harder in that the County has one of the fastest growing ESL populations in the State and we have not been able to keep up. The most recent immigrants are less educated than the immigrants who have previously entered the system, thus requiring greater assistance. The number of ESL positions are not enough to keep up with the needs nor are the state funds sufficient to support these systems.

Sarah Talbert proposed a meeting with Chamber officials and representatives of the four boards to discuss what it was going to take to have the strategies come to fruition. Chair Barnes agreed and said this must be a partnership with the community and would welcome that opportunity. Joab Cotton said this could not happen without more money and said the County Commissioners needed to make a decision regarding the money. Chair Barnes said the systems had to work together to show the public what they would get for this additional funding. Chair Barnes pointed out areas in the state that are achieving academic goals with less money so money is not the total answer but acknowledged that it is going to take both money and targeted programs to meet the proposed goals.

Commissioner Barger asked the school boards what does success look like? He said the County Board believes it should be a 90% achievement level in ABC's and narrowing the achievement gap in the No Child Left Behind legislation and our dropout rate should be decreased by 50%.

It was asked how to achieve this without the necessary dollars and Commissioners Barger did not argue with that question but said the systems had to work together to get this achievement. The Board wants to make sure the brightest and best of students are given the opportunity to exceed and the opportunities need to be enhanced. Another area of focus should be on the middle ground student and it was noted that all jobs in Catawba County do not need a college degree and those middle ground students should be provided opportunities for training such as technical training or journeyman programs.

The response was that its hard to man these technical programs without more funding with personnel already spread thin.

The Boards expressed their desire to proceed with these goals. It was recognized that some goals cannot be measured, such as the children's well-being and helping with their physical and psychological needs, and these areas needed to be addressed.

Chair Barnes recognized that in this economic climate the Commissioners have to grapple with these financial needs with a decreasing tax base.

The response was that the citizens need to be made aware of the value of education and let them know where this money is going and these added funds would make a difference in the education in this community. Chair Barnes stated it would take all four board to communicate this. It was stated if the funding was committed, there would be a major impact on the enthusiasm of the educators in the County.

Commission Hunsucker said if an increase of 5 cent occurred at one time, the school boards may be working with another County board and clarified that they may not have the current board that worked so well with the school boards.

Chair Barnes said that the proposed core group meeting with the Chamber is a wise choice as well as another meeting with just the four boards again after budgets are reviewed. A proposed date for the core group meeting is January 26th. It was agreed to try to get this effort to the next level. It was stated these meetings should be scheduled as soon as possible and that the four boards should meet again, possibly in April, with County Budget hearings in June.

Dr. Will Crawford clarified that there should be clear objectives that could be presented to the public.

Chair Barnes pointed out the Commissioners were dealing with rising healthcare costs, increased Medicaid costs, increases in social services and emergency services, greater support for economic development, demands for infrastructure needs and construction needs such as the addition to the jail in addition to these education costs and all these things drove the budget decisions.

Chair Barnes said she believed there can be great progress for the entire community. No matter what the citizen's age, each is impacted by the education of these children. The four boards needed to convey the value of this education. She thanked all attendees for their commitment to public service.

Schedules will be reviewed to schedule the proposed meetings.

4. The meeting adjourned at 7:33 p.m.

Katherine W. Barnes, Chair

Barbara E. Morris, County Clerk